

December 18, 2009

WASHINGTON, D.C. - United States Senators Mary L. Landrieu, D-La., and Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., and Congressman Charlie Melancon, La.-03, have reintroduced legislation to enhance disability benefits for public safety officers who have been permanently and totally disabled by a catastrophic injury sustained in the line of duty. The legislation, which was endorsed by the Fraternal Order of Police, introduced today improves upon a Landrieu-Melancon bill [introduced last spring](#), and incorporates recommendations from a Government Accountability Office study released earlier this year.

December 18, 2009

WASHINGTON, D.C. - United States Senators Mary L. Landrieu, D-La., and Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., and Congressman Charlie Melancon, La.-03, have reintroduced legislation to enhance disability benefits for public safety officers who have been permanently and totally disabled by a catastrophic injury sustained in the line of duty. The legislation, which was endorsed by the Fraternal Order of Police, introduced today improves upon a Landrieu-Melancon bill [introduced last spring](#), and incorporates recommendations from a Government Accountability Office study released earlier this year.

"Our police officers and first responders put their lives on the line every day to keep us safe," said Sen. Landrieu. "We owe it to these brave men and women to make sure their families are taken care of, if they are killed or disabled in the line of duty. This bill will enhance the financial assistance and educational opportunities to the spouses and children of our fallen first responders."

"When officers put their lives on the line, they also put their families' future and financial security on the line," said Klobuchar. "Families that have experienced a tragedy depend on the benefits program to get by and receive an education. They shouldn't have to wait years for assistance and this bill will give them the aid they need when they need it most."

"When public safety officers become disabled or killed in the line of duty, their families suffer not just the loss of a loved one but also the loss of a primary provider," said Rep. Melancon. "With the First Responders Support Act, the families of these heroes will suffer a little less as a result of their sacrifice. They will have more help with covering their bills, family members will have access to mental health counseling, and their children won't be deprived of a college education. Senator Landrieu, Senator Klobuchar and I will work together to honor our fallen first responders and support their families by passing this bill into law."

The First Responders Act streamlines the Department of Justice's Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program and increases benefits for spouses and children of deceased public safety officers, such as police officers, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians. Under existing law, surviving family members receive a one-time payment of \$311,810. The legislation would increase the benefit to \$350,000.

The legislation also creates a proportionately lower level of disability benefits for public safety officers that have sustained a serious injury but are still able to perform some type of work. Currently, officers injured in the line of duty do not receive any benefits unless they are permanently and totally unable to work. Many officers don't want to retire, but they need disability benefits to help with medical bills after a serious injury. This legislation will help them recover and go back to work.

The legislation increases the lifetime educational benefit allowed under the Public Safety Officers' Educational Assistance (PSOEA) Benefit Program. Under the current law, this program can defray an individual's tuition and fees, room and board, books, supplies, and other education-related costs. As of October 1, 2007, the maximum award for a full-time student is \$881 per month of class attendance. An individual can only take advantage of the benefit for a maximum of 45 months over his or her lifetime--totaling \$41,625 at \$925 per month of class attendance. The legislation increases the benefit to \$1,500 per month, totaling \$67,500 over an individual's lifetime. This roughly reflects the average cost of attending college in the United States.

The legislation also creates an office within the Department of Justice that distributes grants to local organizations that provide free or reduced cost mental health services and counseling to family members of fallen officers and firefighters, or seriously injured first responders who are struggling to recover from an injury. The office will serve as a clearinghouse for state and local first responders and their families so that they can find such services for free or at discounted rates.

IMPROVING PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

Expediting Claims/Benefits: This legislation would require that the Department of Justice's Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program provide claimants with a status report and a disposition of benefits claims within six months of when they submit a complete claims application and all necessary supplemental information. In addition, this legislation requires that all benefits be paid to the designated beneficiaries within 12 months of submitting a completed claim.

Education and Outreach: Currently, the Department of Justice's Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program conducts periodic national training for law enforcement officials to educate eligible agencies on filing and processing of Public Safety Officer Benefit Program claims. This legislation authorizes the appropriation of \$2 million a year from FY 2011-2015 to hire employees and obtain necessary technology and equipment to further outreach and education of eligible agencies. In addition, the legislation authorizes the appropriation of \$800,000 a year from FY2011-FY2015 for the education and assistance of eligible agencies located in rural areas.

Prioritization of Claims: The legislation directs the director of the Bureau of Justice Assistance to create, adopt and a system for the prioritization of claims. This system will be based on the severity of the claims and amount of definitive evidence provided by the claimant. For example, priority may be given to claims where the eligible beneficiaries are the survivors of a deceased officer or the eligible officer suffers from totally and complete paralysis.

Descended

#